

Living In Divided Houses

Mark 3:20-35
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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Let's see, where to begin in addressing the many issues presented in this biblical text from Mark 3? Here are some choices:

- Family interventions
- Demonic exorcisms
- Satan
- The consequences of being divided
- The 'unpardonable sin'
- A new definition of what it means to be a 'family' ambivalent

Let's start with this. Chances are you are familiar with the phrase, **"If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand"** (Mk 3:25). Most folks think the author of this famous phrase was Abraham Lincoln, because he used it so effectively in 1856 during his Illinois senatorial debate with Stephen Douglas. Lincoln rightly recognized the impossibility of the United States enduring the status of being half slave and half free. The resulting Civil War almost bore witness to the falling of a nation that was so severely divided against itself.

Our own Presbyterian denomination at the time of the Civil War, however, did indeed fulfill this prediction of how a house divided against itself will not stand. Many Presbyterian theologians and pastors in the South used the scriptures to defend and justify both slavery and secession from the Union. After all, in the Old Testament, Abraham was a slaveholder, and the Laws of Moses did not abolish slavery but instead regulated it. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul admonished Christian slaves to obey their masters and be content with their lot in life – to simply be the best slave that you can be.

It was the division over this issue of slavery that was the fault line that led to an earthquake in our denomination. Presbyterians split into Northern and Southern branches. We remained separate denominations for over 120 years, only reuniting in 1983. So, when we reflect upon how Christian churches in this country are divided over any number of issues today, we need only look at our own history to notice that divisions have led to a divided house that falls time and time again.

Presbyterians came close to dividing again over the issue of sexual identity and the ordination of open LGBTQ persons of faith, who believed they were called by God to serve. And later, when the denomination allowed gay and lesbian couples to marry, and Presbyterian pastors to officiate. Many congregations in our denomination, however, did indeed leave to join one of the smaller more conservative Presbyterian offshoot denominations. The good news is that over the past several years the Presbyterian Church (USA) is not nearly the house divided it was before those departures. While many still believe we would be stronger if we could all stay together, we've learned that when one part of the family simply cannot continue to be with and

live into right relationship with the rest, then separation and division – even if not the will of God – is one solution, and perhaps the most healthy one for all concerned. Unfortunately, the United Methodist Church denomination is currently in the process of a formal division and split over this very same issue.

Like issues before it, including slavery, the ordination of women, whether divorced clergy should be defrocked, the allowing of interracial marriage, and a woman's right to reproductive choice (which, by the way, is the *official* position of our denomination), **some people continue to cherry-pick selected Bible verses to vehemently defend historical and traditional positions and practices which more progressive folks consider to be steeped in historical (and thus current) prejudice, injustice, ignorance, and fear.** It's unconscionable and I believe downright sinful for anyone to use scripture to uphold the supposed superiority and privilege of any group of people over any other. And it still happens, a lot. Many, including myself, believe current laws being passed that intentionally lead to voter suppression fall into the same category.

One of the questions we are called to wrestle with, however, is this: **Are there legitimate issues that divide a house to such a point that division becomes the only viable option?** If, for instance, that house is a family facing the horror of domestic violence and abuse, then that, in the opinion of most pastors today, is indeed a legitimate cause for separation, for that house to fall.

Yet, Jesus' point remains valid. **Any entity truly divided against itself can reach the point where it cannot stand, whether it be a household, the church, or even a country.** It seems clear to many that the insurrection at our nation's Capitol on January 6 of this year, based on the false claims that the presidential election was stolen and therefore something – including violence – needed to be done to overturn the results, is evidence of our current severe division that perhaps is pointing again to a fragile democracy. This scripture passage hopes that any house, however that is defined, never reaches that point of division. That is why, through God's Spirit, **we continue to work toward unity.**

In the context of Jesus' statement about how divided houses cannot stand comes another issue that I want to address, one that's almost never dealt with in our denomination. As the Church Lady on Saturday Night Live used to say, "Can you say 'Satan?'" Our biblical story reports that the scribes were trying to destroy Jesus' authority with the crowds by claiming that his power to cast out demons was coming from Satan himself, not God. As a quick aside, I've decided to wait (maybe forever) to fully address this issue referred to as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, called the eternal or 'unpardonable sin.' But as I've heard it explained, if you've ever worried that you may have committed the unpardonable sin, then you haven't. So, stop worrying!

Jesus claimed the scribes' charge was preposterous because that would mean the prince of demons was casting out other demons – and that would lead to a divided house that could not stand. Yet, **how do we approach this issue of satanic power, of evil, in our postmodern, progressive age?** For that I want to turn to some thoughts by the Rev. Gibson "Nibs" Stroupe, a human rights author and pastor of the diverse Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur, Georgia, outside of Atlanta. He writes:

The word "Satan does not necessarily mean a personality with horns and a red tail, but it does name a demonic power that is actively engaged against the compassionate and reconciling love of God. This is the reality that Jesus names

here, and whether we believe in a person named "Satan" is not as important as hearing about our captivity to the powers of evil signified by "Satan," powers that continue to seek our allegiance. Satan and Beelzebul...name the forces and configurations of power that capture us and cause us to hurt ourselves, hurt others, and hurt God.

Stroupe then rightly lists some of these **destructive powers, such as: racism, patriarchy, materialism, and militarism**. These powers of darkness still have a strong hold here in this country, do they not?

In reference to Satan, Jesus tells a parable in which the "strong man" must first be bound up before he can be dealt with. The same is true with all the destructive powers we face today.

Mixed up with all this is Jesus' family who thinks he's gone out of his mind, or at least off the deep end. So, in an act we would now call a family intervention, they seek to remove Jesus from the crowds he is teaching. Jesus' response seems harsh and even offensive, but it is really just a teaching about expanding our circle of inclusiveness and where we place our highest loyalties. **Jesus re-defines 'family' by expanding it beyond simply blood relatives to include all those who "do the will of God" (Mk 3:35) as his brother and sister and mother.** Jesus refuses to allow cultural or even familial expectations to thwart his mission. We are asked to do the same.

Stroupe adds a personal illustration for which many of us can find points of connection, especially now that we have all spent time reflecting upon what we have learned of what happened before, during, and after the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. He says that even though he grew up with white supremacy as culturally, and to an extent religiously acceptable – even within his own family – he came to understand that racism was not God's will. He began to be in internal conflict with the beliefs of his family and community, who he loved deeply.

How many of us here today haven't gone through some of the same struggle in dealing with, and sometimes rejecting, some of the things that we were taught and were ingrained in us as children by family, by the church, and by the culture in which we grew up? Many of us here at College Hill, including myself, had much of the same struggle that Stroupe describes when it comes to the issue of sexual identity and sexual orientation. Many of us, then, might now be able to appreciate why **Jesus called the configuration of destructive and oppressive forces "Satan"**. And we can understand why Jesus, though not anti-family, indicated that his loving family might sometimes be part of the problem. That's why so many, especially those who have experienced rejection by their biological family to some extent, rely so deeply on what is called their "**chosen family**". That is certainly being celebrated during this PRIDE month of June.

With what is most likely is an overriding sentiment of every person here this morning, we are **blessed to be able to call College Hill our chosen family!** And we should be deeply grateful that while being able to acknowledge our differences, we are not a house divided. Therefore, by the grace of God, we shall not fall!

Oh, and by the way, the answer of what to do when the house is divided is to simply **continue to love God, love your neighbor, love your enemy, and love yourself.** And while we're at it, let's not pour any more fuel on the fires of polarization and division that we face on a daily basis.

Amen.

Resources: *Feasting on the Word*